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ABSTRACT

The proficiency-based German program in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University occupies an essential and integral but not central role in the overall foreign service program. It includes three years' instruction, in addition to the two years required for admission. Three levels are offered, and although students may take the proficiency examination at the advanced level, most choose either to study abroad or enroll in post-advanced courses first. Six categories of linguistic goals are specified (reading comprehension, listening comprehension, grammar and word order, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency) with five competence levels established. The foreign service content component is less specifically articulated by levels. The proficiency examination is separate from the final course examination and is recorded separately in each student's official transcript. The proficiency examination consists of a reading comprehension component and a free oral examination, and each student is evaluated by two faculty. The proficiency-based approach has increased awareness of goals and appropriate instructional materials. Students have strongly supported the approach, and both student and faculty morale and goal-orientation have been enhanced by it. Although the testing method is cumbersome and of limited application, it has served as a good reflection of faculty, students, program structure, materials, and methodology. (MSE)

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PROFICIENCY-BASED GERMAN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

Paper presented at workshop

Proficiency-Based Foreign Language Programs: Language-Specific Considerations

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by

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Within this panel on language-specific considerations I wish to report on the proficiency-based program in German at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University which, for many years, has made passing a FL oral proficiency exam a requirement for graduation. Although this requirement can be fulfilled through a number of different languages, and has been particularly and equally well worked out and coordinated for Spanish, French, and German, my summary will pertain only to the German component.

I will describe the program by presenting

- a brief characterization of its goals and, by extension, of the test,

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- the generic oral proficiency criteria which are the basis for the evaluation,
- the content criteria which were established for German,
- details of test administration, and
- some statistics on test results.

Based on this information I would like to address some broader implications of a proficiency-oriented program, for example for curricula, enrollment, and the testing procedure.

I would like to stress at the outset that the proficiency-testing performed at Georgetown University, though it, of course, indirectly incorporates listening comprehension and also has a reading comprehension component , is really limited to oral proficiency only. Furthermore, it does not follow the format refined by ACTFL/ETS on the basis of the FSI method of examination, a format which is currently receiving widespread attention in the profession. In other words, it is not an oral interview with the precise meaning that concept has acquired. It does not progress clearly through the phases of warm-up, level check, probes and wind-down, where each phase is tailored by the interviewer to the linguistic performance of the candidate and is carefully monitored for such categories as which linguistic functions he or she can perform, in what major content/context areas, and with what degree of accuracy.

By extension, ratings are also not assigned according to the descriptions of the ACTFL/ETS guidelines and scale, from Novice Low to Superior. Its precise approach will, I hope, become clear in the course of my presentation. But I did feel it essential to bring up this point immediately.

As somewhat of an aside, important nevertheless, I would like to add that there are two very strong reasons for that state of affairs, less than satisfactory though it admittedly is:

First, the proficiency requirement at Georgetown has been in place for a good number of years and predates significantly the efforts by ACTFL/ETS to adopt the concept of proficiency for the academic environment and, consequently, its efforts of adapting the FSI oral proficiency scale to academic needs.

Secondly, although college professors are now more and more able to participate in intensive workshops that enable them to conduct an oral interview properly and rate the candidate reliably, it has thus far not been possible for our university to have enough of its faculty members thoroughly trained in all the languages in which this test must be administered to a rather sizable number of students. Obviously, this is a serious challenge to the faculty and the administration, even given strong institutional support. At the same time it points out the eminent need for regio-

nal centers, similar to the one due to become operational at the University of Pennsylvania in early 1984, at which such training could be obtained by those interested. Until then we will most likely continue to use the current tool even though we are aware of its shortcomings.

But now let me introduce the program itself. Background: I would like to provide the following background information. The foreign language proficiency exam is administered to all students in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, one of the five undergraduate schools, and the oldest and largest school of its kind in the country. It considers as its primary mission that of providing an education in international affairs, broadly defined as encompassing study in the social sciences, the humanities, and foreign languages. Its undergraduate programs of study are multidisciplinary in nature, designed to prepare the students for further academic or professional study and for public and private international careers.

Such an orientation indicates the integral role of FL study in the total program while at the same time pointing out its overriding function as a tool, as a vehicle toward a multitude of ends, none of which put the study of language per se into the center. At the risk of simplification one might say that our foreign service students

aspire to high-level use of language toward certain goals in non-language careers and typically are less disposed to concentrate on the structure and use of the language synchronically and diachronically or its particular manifestations and meanings in verbal works of art.

Program Structure: According to admission regulations, the students come with a background of at least two years' training in a foreign language. That does not preclude them from starting a language different from the one previously studied or being placed into the Introductory level of the one they have studied as a result of the placement examination which every entering student has to take.

At the School of Foreign Service we offer three years of language classes proper, at three weekly meetings each plus one additional weekly hour of conversation practice conducted by an upperlevel student. The levels are Introductory, Intermediate, and Advanced. Toward the end of the advanced course students are entitled to attempt the proficiency examination. In reality, however, less than half of the students take this option immediately. On the one hand about 40 percent of the graduates will include a study abroad experience, ideally a year in length. This naturally pushes the language performance expected of them beyond that typically associated with an advanced class. On the other hand about 20 percent of the students

enroll in post-advanced courses. Although all literature and area studies courses are available to them just as they are to our German majors and minors, most SFS students opt for subject matter courses which offer international affairs content in the FL. Among them are a Business German course, a course entitled Deutsche Wirschaftskunde and numerous lectures and seminars on the foreign economy, politics, diplomacy, or history which vary according to the specialty of the Visiting German Professor of an endowed chair.

Goals: The goals of language learning which SFS students strive for can be characterized as falling into the broad categories of linguistic goals and content goals. These are perhaps best explained by a look at the evaluation grid used by examiners during the examination. As you will note, the linguistic goals are, in turn, broken down into the six categories of reading comprehension, listening comprehension, grammar and word order, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. There is a distinct similarity between this table and some of the earlier grids prepared by FSI for their proficiency testing requirements and, in fact, that work was the basis for this grid. Put in more global terms, the stated goal of FL instruction is to bring the students to a language proficiency level which will enable them to use the FL with sufficient structural accuracy to handle all general conversation and general and some spe-

cific professional discussion of international affairs.

This means a number of things for the approaches favored in the classroom. It implies a predominance of comprehension and speaking, followed by reading skills, with less extensive writing. Furthemore, if the stated goal is communication in the language then pronunciation and intonation can hardly be overestimated. Students are expected to handle the structures which are appropriate for competent discussion of the topics at hand, topics which have a decidedly academic and abstract flavor and often require nothing more and nothing less than a certain amount of factual background information. This necessarily places heavy emphasis on topical vocabulary, that is, the terminology which characterizes a given subject. And, finally, the goal implies an awareness and successful employment of verbal strategies, all of which manifests itself in the aspect of fluency.

For each one of the categories five levels of competence were established, ranging from excellent to poor. And then brief descriptions were arrived at which would characterize the students' performance in a certain skill area for a certain level.

The second goal component, Foreign Service content, is not nearly as well articulated by levels, a fact which indicates that this examination is definitely language-dominant. This is not to say, however, that the expecta-

tions as to what content students should be familiar with are themselves vague. On the contrary, topical guidelines are prepared for the students so as to assure that they are aware of what is involved. In fact, lack of knowledge in the content area can reduce a student's rating in an exam that was otherwise quite acceptable judging only from the language standpoint.

Testing Procedure: The procedures for the examination are the following:

All students are examined by a board consisting of at least two language faculty members, neither one of which may be the students' current instructor. The proficiency exam is separate from the final course examination and grade and is a separate entry in a student's official transcript. Undergraduate students receiving a rating of excellent, very good, good and fair are considered to have satisfied the degree requirements.

The overall format is as follows: each language department publishes the list of topics well prior to the exam. The students are advised to prepare several of the listed themes in depth and are expected to be able to comment intelligently on the rest. The exam consists of two parts: (1) a reading selection for which the student is given 20 minutes preparation time; its comprehension is ascertained in the oral examination; and (2) the free oral exam as such

which lasts about 20 minutes. Reading comprehension is checked at the beginning, typically by having the students summarize the main points and/or asking them to elaborate on some broader issues which are raised by the article. Then the students are asked to speak on a topic which is of special interest to them. This, of course, is to let them become comfortable and confident in a potentially tense situation. The number of questions being asked will vary widely. It is determined by the scope and broadness of the question itself, the expansiveness of the students' response, their willingness and ability to elaborate and, not the least, the state of their nerves.

Each examiner independently evaluates the students' overall performance according to the various categories on the grid sheet. Then both will compare their individual results and come to an agreement on the performance. Experience has shown that well-seasoned examiners rarely disagree significantly, thus assuring a fairly objective evaluation of our students' oral proficiency in German.

The results of the last few semesters are tabulated on a separate sheet.

Before turning to some of the effects a proficiency requirement can have for a FL program I would like to address briefly and in a very impressionistic manner the matter of equivalencies between these ratings and the ACTFL/ETS rating scale that many of you most likely are familiar with.

I would like to suggest that a rating of "excellent" is at the Superior level and above, "very good" and "good" correspond approximately to Advanced Plus and Advanced, and "fair" and "poor" are roughly Intermediate High and Intermediate Mid to Low, respectively. Since an advanced level course is required before the student can sign up for the examination there is no need to take the scale lower down to the Novice level.

As for the effects on the entire program they have been gradual, but, over the period of time involved, quite pervasive and profound. I would like to discuss some of them in the four areas of

- curriculum, materials, and teaching methodology,
- student motivation and response,
- something as elusive as program morale and effect on faculty,
- and, finally, testing considerations.

In the first category, curriculum, materials, and teaching methodology, there is no doubt that basing a program on the concept of proficiency has a profound effect on creating a very wholesome awareness of what our goals are, what classroom procedures are most likely to lead to the attainment of these goals, and what broad categories of materials experience has shown to be most conducive. Strange as it may seem, the mere articulation of goals is

a decided step forward to an integrated approach to language teaching in an academic setting. While it is perhaps difficult to point to proficiency as the primary motivating force behind the project, the German department found it most useful, indeed imperative, to establish an integrated curriculum sequence which stated goals quite clearly for each level of language instruction. Likewise, the inherent resistance to what at first seems like an intrusion on the academic freedom each instructor insists upon can be effectively reduced if it is made clear that individual faculty members are free to experiment or pursue their well-considered options, - all on the basis of a broadly defined consensus that certain approaches seem more likely to lead to success than others.

Just what are these approaches that seem to have worked well for us? There is a strong indication that courses incorporating a significant amount of listening comprehension work far beyond what typically accompanies the text books, - and here we have found the German Inter-Nationes series to be simply invaluable -, is imperative. Likewise, a multi-media approach through films, video-materials, slides, guest lectures, voluntary discussion groups seems most appropriate, all of which enhances readiness to speak. Also, a goodly amount of extensive reading for global understanding and intensive reading for

details in diverse publications, well-known national newspapers, news magazines, and journals, is well-suited for the goals. Of primary importance, however, is that these efforts must be conjoined and coordinated with a lively communication-oriented, interactive classroom which is meaning-centered and respects the students' intellect and persona, as well as their different learning styles. In general, a greater emphasis on lexical expansion with an international slant is beneficial and overall not too difficult to attain since the students' entire program of study is oriented in that direction, thus creating the very advantageous situation of high motivational involvement and significant cognitive bases which can be transferred to the FL class. As you undoubtedly suspect, that greater lexical expansion takes place, to some extent, at the expense of grammatical accuracy and, similar to what has been reported elsewhere, it is the element of very high grammatical accuracy that typically ends up being the deciding factor for an "excellent" rating. This trade-off between accuracy and fluency is something that continually challenges faculty and students alike. At present, though, we must concede that, given the time constraints and significant differences in students' backgrounds which we face in the classroom, we have no good remedy to offer for this dilemma. Nevertheless, even with this shortcoming we find it a rather positive sign that students whose primary interests are <u>not</u>

in the language field are in fact able to achieve these levels of proficiency.

To come to the second point, student motivation and response, perhaps it will surprise you,but there is no doubt that the students strongly support the concept of a proficiency examination, - which is not to say at all that they cherish it. On the contrary, from the beginning of their undergraduate careers they are keenly aware of it, if not to say concerned and fearful of it. By the same token, this keeps their efforts in the FL class at a most appropriate level when otherwise there would be a very real dangaer in a very demanding and competitive program that the FL class becomes the unnecessary fifth wheel. Another manifestation of this significant student concern is the fact that they freely attend extra-curricular FL events, be they more student-sponsored social activities or more formal departmental offerings. Likewise, there is a lot of extensive reading on their own since the general assessment among the students is that the examination cannot otherwise be handled well. As already mentioned, interest in language courses continues even past the requirement since the students are eager to have a good showing on the proficiency exam. And it even extends beyond the proficiency exam, obviously an indication that by then students feel quite comfortable with the foreign language and find working in it

a pleasureable experience.

In their totality, these factors significantly enhance program morale. Students and faculty alike seem to be working toward a common goal and, if I may overgeneralize, there seems less of a feeling of opposing sides but more one of a shared enterprise. Though admittedly difficult to measure, it seems to me to have helped to maintain the excitement of the combined efforts of students and faculty within the department.

As my last point I must, of course, state that the testing procedure is certainly a very time-consuming undertaking, an administrative burden in its preparation, scheduling, and reporting of results. Even with good cooperation among faculty it is not necessarily greeted with exuberance by anyone concerned. Nevertheless, once one gets into it, it has a way of carrying itself and becoming a very valuable mirror of reflection for the entire department, its faculty, students, program structure, materials, and methodological approach. While we have found the format followed quite appropriate for our internal purposes, it definitely has only limited application. Beyond the walls of Georgetown it is, like grades in general, of restricted value. It is for this reason, in addition to the much more elaborated structure and greater reliability and

validity of the OI, that I would enthusiastically welcome additional support of the ACTFL/ETS project, most likely through various channels of government funding, to help universities reap the benefits of placing their programs on the solid base of the concept of proficiency in all skill areas.

	READING COMPREHENSION	LISTENING COMPREHENSION	GRAMMAR AND WORD ORDER	VOCABULARY	PRONUNCIATION (incl. word accent and sentence pitch)	FLUENCY	SFS CONTENT
EXCELLENT	Full and in-depth discussion of content, showing total understanding of material including intention and tone of author.	Understands everything; no adjustments in speed or vocabulary are needed.	Uses target language with few (if any) noticeable errors	Use of vocabulary "idioms" is virtually that of a native speaker of the target language	Speaks with few (if any) traces of "foreign accent".	Speech on all professional matters as apparently effortless as in English; easy to listen to.	Exhibiting accuracy, deep understanding and broad knowledge of the subject matter.
VERY GOOD	Demonstrates a sound and almost thorough understanding of content, but some particular detail or nuance may escape the student.	Understands nearly everything at normal speed, though occasional repetition may be necessary.	In general, uses language well, but with occasional errors which do not, however, obscure meaning.	Rarely has trouble expressing self with appropriate vocabulary and "idioms".	Correct pronunciation but one is conscious of a slight "accent."	Ease of expression. Eager participant in conversation.	Demonstrates broad and accurate knowledge in most areas, although may not be thoroughly familiar with some particulars of the topic under discussion.
GOOD	Can discuss primarily the prominent ideas or elements of reading selection; may perhaps not grasp the emotional thrust of it.	Understands fairly well at slightly slower-than-normal speed with some repetition.	Meaning only occasionally obscured by grammatical and/or word order errors.	Sometimes uses inappropriate terms and/or round-about language because of inadequate vocab.	Understandable: speaks with a definite "foreign accent" which might lead to minor misunderstanding and need for repetition.	Rarely hesitant, always able to sustain conversation at least through circumlocutions.	Can answer some questions fully, knows relatively little on others. Has some gaps in content background.
FAIR	Has great difficulty demonstrating more than a rudimentary and superficial understanding of the reading selection. Frequently confuses facts and may even miss one of the primary components of selection.	Obviously has trouble understanding; frequent adjustments in speed and vocabulary are necessary.	Not very satisfactory; frequently needs to rephrase constructions and/or restricts self to basic structural patterns: e.g. Present tense instead of Past or Future.	May frequently use the wrong words (e.g. false cognates); speech limited to basic vocabulary.	Many errors in pronunciation, word stress (words are frequently accented on wrong syllable), sentence pitch. Necessitates concentrated listening and frequent repetitions required.	Often hesitant; may be forced to silence by limitations of grammar and vocabulary.	Frequent hesitation, confusion of prominent facts, skirting of subject and superficial knowledge.
POOR	Has grave difficulty following the reading selection; confuses subject and object, perhaps loses the time frame; fails to make responses.	Understands only very general conversational subjects at slow speed with frequent repetitions.	Errors of grammar and word order make comprehension quite difficult.	Misuse of words and very limited vocabulary make comprehension difficult.	Very hard to understand due to sound, accent, pitch difficulties.	Except for memorized expressions, every utterance requires enormous effort.	Has little or no familiarity with the concepts or themes to be discussed.

GERMAN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION
RESULTS

I. In absolute numbers:

	S. 78	F. 78	S. 79	F. 79	S. 80	F. 80	S. 81	F. 81	S. 82	F. 82	S. 83
Excellent	1		2	2	2	5	0	2	2	2	2
Very Good	7		10	4	9	3	15	4	14	7	4
Good	13		14	3	11	4	18	6	12	2	7
Fair	6		3	1	11	2	9	4	11	3	3
Poor	0		0	1	2	2	1	1	0	1	6
Total	27	16	29	11	35	16	43	17	39	15	22

II. In percentages:

Excellent	3.7	6.9	18.2	5.7	31.3	0	11.8	5.1	13.3	9.1
Very Good	25.9	34.5	36.4	25.7	18.8	34.9	23.5	35.9	46.7	18.2
Good	48.1	48.3	27.3	31.4	25	42.9	35.3	30.8	13.3	31.8
Fair	22.2	10.3	9.1	31.4	12.5	20.9	23.5	28.2	20	13.6
Poor	0	0	9.1	5.7	12.5	2.3	5.9	0	6.7	27.3